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Audience Experience in Rimini Protokoll's *Outdoors*

ABSTRACT

This article details audiences' responses to *Outdoors* (2010-2011), the first UK commission for contemporary performance company Rimini Protokoll. Collaborating with Wales' brand-new English-language national theatre, thirteen members of a Welsh community choir were asked to film a series of narrated journeys around the town of Aberystwyth. By watching choir members' pre-recorded videos and listening to their memories, audiences followed the lead of these absent performers around town. Drawing on findings from The National Theatre Wales Audience Research project, this article asks how participants managed their performative engagements with Aberystwyth, which was simultaneously presented on iPod screens and experienced as a guided tour. It argues that audiences' mediated engagements were a process of simultaneous remembering and forgetting: a dual-perceptive balancing act in which feelings of immersion and distance were processed contemporaneously. While Aberystwyth was presented by *Outdoors* as a place twice lost, audiences' responses suggested that the experience of place hadn't quite been found.

KEYWORDS

Rimini Protokoll;
audience;
immersion;
participation;
National Theatre
Wales; technology;
mobility

Every Tuesday evening for a year, between February 2011 and 2012, thirteen people walked the streets of Aberystwyth, a small coastal town in mid-Wales. After collecting in a local pub, audience members fanned out across the pavements and car parks and alleyways of the town. Plugged into iPods, eyes on their screens, they were following in the digital footsteps of thirteen local people. These non-professional 'guides' were all members of an Aberystwyth-based choir called Heartsong, who had agreed to take part in the performance by pre-recording a series of walks around town. Their journeys had been filmed weeks or months beforehand, and so as audience members followed their guide's path they could see the path in front of them layered against the choir member's earlier journey, played contemporaneously on the iPod. I found this to be a strange disjunction. The ghostly joggers that appeared on my screen were absent in actuality. The sea, which at the time of filming had frothed with waves, was spread around the harbour slippery calm. It was surprisingly difficult to avoid stepping into the path of a bus when the video showed an empty street, or to banish the jolt as an ethereal car passed straight through me. If this sounds confusing in the retelling, that's because it was. Onscreen ephemera were both there and not there, absent yet present.

This was *Outdoors*, part of the inaugural season of National Theatre Wales and the first UK commission for Rimini Protokoll, a German-Swiss performance company led by Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel. Working independently from the company as a researcher at Aberystwyth University, then doing my PhD, I captured audiences' responses via post-show questionnaires in order to examine how actual participants made sense of the experience. In doing so I hoped to fill a more general gap. As Helen Freshwater pointed out back in 2009, when it comes to understanding the audience experience, theatre studies has focused mainly on constructing models of reception from the academic analyses of one or two professionally-implicated spectators, and thereby superimposing their own reactions on to an imagined 'ideal'. In such ways, Freshwater suggests, theatre studies often continues to assert an ability to speak on behalf of 'the audience' as a whole. Alternatively, my research takes its lead from Freshwater's provocation that valuable information is lost through the reluctance of theatre studies to consider the opinions of a wider spectrum of individuals. By introducing a wider range of responses – in this case, from 81 individual participants – this article intends to add this missing empirical dimension to an overwhelmingly abstract discussion of spectatorship.

It is critical here to remember that the people I cite in this article were responding to a specific production, which offered a particular kind of aesthetic invitation and which took place in a certain time and place. In a later section I explicate the theoretical terrain in which the production took place, with *Outdoors* drawing together aspects of particular (albeit hugely diverse) forms of performance practice. It was 'located' (Sedgman 2016), 'mobile' (Wilkie 2012), and 'intermedial' in its use of technology (Chapple & Kattenbelt 2002); it asked audiences to engage in distinctly participatory/immersive ways rather than sitting quietly in a theatre auditorium; it used 'real' (local) people as performers rather than professionally-trained actors.¹ This research therefore required me to ask how empirical methods can usefully interrogate assumptions about this kind of audience experience.

This was admittedly complex. By taking audiences on a guided walk through Aberystwyth, *Outdoors* invited them to engage with the town through two concurrent lenses. At the same time as viewing a past form of Aberystwyth via the video, which

¹ As Jan Roselt explains, one of the most pressing questions for anyone writing about the company is what to call these 'real people'. 'Actors? Performers? Players? Amateurs? Or experts of daily life?' (ibid). Following the 2008 publication of Roselt's chapter, Rimini Protokoll have used the term 'real experts' to describe their collaborators, whose personal stories, emotions, and, in many cases, physical/aural presence are used to direct the performance process (Garde and Mumford 2012, 16-17).

had been filmed and narrated by the local choir members and then spliced together by the production team, participants were also experiencing its buildings and pedestrians in the present, first-hand. Moreover, the video itself layered multiple versions of the past, with guides' audio narratives describing their memories of Aberystwyth from years or even decades ago. My aim was to understand how participants themselves processed and described the experience of making meaning from these various layers.

As this article explains, the three aspects – people, place, and technology – are hard to separate. In fact, they might usefully be seen as overlapping lenses, with audiences asked to engage with the town *through* the stories of local people, which in turn were relayed *through* the locative technology of mediating screens. In order to explain how participants managed this perceptual balancing act, it has therefore been necessary to situate the responses gathered against theoretical ideas about site-specificity, technology, and mobility, as well as about 'immersive' participation itself.

Janelle Reinelt explains why this last point is important: because although theatre scholars 'have been willing, even eager to discuss [...] participatory performance', this scholarship – despite being 'all about spectatorship' – is mostly a 'theoretical and analytical discussion of the art works themselves', and therefore 'does not (usually) get us any closer to investigating and specifying the social experiences of actual spectators; yet our field has seen a highly charged debate about the worth of participation' (2014, 339). Matthew Reason (2015) further identifies these supposed audience effects as variously political (empowering), ethical (empathetic), creative (not reactionary), and promoting wellbeing (physically active). In other words, Reason suggests, immersive and participatory performances are frequently spoken about in near-utopian terms, even if the supposed outcomes are hazily defined and even more loosely evidenced. What Freshwater, Reinelt, Reason, and many others have begun to advocate is the development of new methods to understand the *processes* of participation – of valuation and sense-making – that actual audience members go through in their theatrical encounters. This article attempts this task, by considering what it actually means for different people to experience place through the screen of an iPod, the murmur of headphones, the mediated stories of 'amateur' performers. In doing so, it intends to help open up our prevailing understanding of mediated immersion. While theorists such as Gareth White (2013), Josephine Machon (2013), and Adam Alston (2016) have (amongst others) valuably situated immersive reception as a process of *deepening*, this article shows how audiences actually experience this process by actively balancing their dual awareness of surface and depth.

‘Lots of Potential But’: Evaluating *Outdoors*

A lost John Osborne play in a Cardiff theatre. Teenagers in a nightclub remembering death. A real terraced house in Snowdonia full of weather; a fake house sitting open on a military range in the Beacons. A theatrical extravaganza spanning the whole of Port Talbot. Performance games on Prestatyn beach. These are just a few of the productions that made up the inaugural year of Wales’ new English-language national theatre company. Running between March 2010 and March 2011, NTW’s initial season was presented as a theatrical mapping of Wales, comprising thirteen unique productions in thirteen locations, each produced by a different creative team (Sedgman 2016).

Based on 558 post-show questionnaires captured during NTW’s launch year, *Outdoors* attracted a higher number of critical responses than their other productions. On average across the thirteen events, 63% of audience members rated the performance they had seen Excellent, 27% Good, and 7% Average. For *Outdoors*, only 32% rated the event Excellent, 52% Good, and 14% Average. I have elsewhere mapped audiences’ reactions to National Theatre Wales’ overarching concern of exploring nation through place and place through performance, with particular focus on *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* and *The Persians* (Sedgman 2016). This article presents my first opportunity to ask what it means for audiences to explore location as a kind of intermedial guided tour, and to ask what it was that made *Outdoors* feel less of a success.

First it is necessary to situate both the ambulant and the technological aspects of this production within a long performance tradition. From the Surrealists’ ‘automatic writing’ and the subsequent Situationist International movement’s *dérive* (‘drift’) (Darby 2013), many companies have experimented with the performative potential of moving through place.² Fiona Wilkie recently argued that peripatetic practices seek to unveil the ways site itself is inherently mobile: a kind of complex ‘activity-in-motion’ (2012, 208), with spaces continuously written and rewritten

² Lone Twin’s ‘ecological’ performances investigate the interplay between rootedness and travel (Lavery and Williams 2011; Overend 2013); Forced Entertainment’s *Nights in this City* (1997) problematised its own positioning of audiences as tourists on a coach trip through Sheffield (Tomlin 1999); Mike Kelley’s *Mobile Homestead* (2010) drove a truck around a working-class suburb of Detroit (Wilkie 2012, 208). Within Wales, too, Brith Gof and, later, the company’s director Mike Pearson have been especially influential in asking what it means to ‘move through space rather than occupying enclosed performance arenas’ [original emphasis] (Turner 2004, 377): a practice that has been clearly embedded within particular discourses about located performance, in which formal experimentation has historically been used to ask unsettling questions about local/national spatial politics and Welsh identity formation (Sedgman 2016).

rather than enclosing static meanings. Many contemporary performance companies – Rimini Protokoll among them – have integrated technological elements within their mobile productions specifically as a way of interrogating place. From their earlier *Call Cutta* (2005), which employed an Indian call centre to direct participants on live city tours of both Calcutta and Berlin, to their *Remote X* series (2013), which used headsets to lead a ‘horde’ of participants around a city, Rimini Protokoll’s work has been characterized by ongoing explorations of the ‘relationship between media and materiality’ (Parker-Starbuck 2011a, 61). This builds on influential examples ranging from Janet Cardiff’s 1990s ‘Walks’ (Nedelkopoulou 2011), to Pearson’s 2001 *Polis* (Roms 2004), which both used digital technologies to weave together physical and digital memories of place. Without reducing the complexity of this tradition, de Souza e Silva & Sutko suggest that within performance the growing popularity of locative media seeks to expose the ways our technological engagements ‘transform the way we experience places’ (2009, 72), creating what Blast Theory’s Matt Adams terms ‘Hertzian space’, ‘in which we inhabit simultaneously nearby and remote locations, physical and digital spaces’ (quoted in *ibid*). Christopher Balme has suggested that it is in such ways Rimini Protokoll habitually blur the borders between corporeal and digital. In fact, he says, one cannot discuss their work

in terms of competition between the live and the mediatized: the relationship between the two is entirely symbiotic; they are imbricated into one another like Siamese twins and cannot be prised apart without severe damage ensuing. (2008, 90)

While this extensive body of scholarship has considered the experiential significance of locative media, what have hitherto been neglected are the embodied perspectives of audiences themselves. My approach involves asking how participants make sense of their encounters with competing realities? By opening up Balme’s contention of inseparability, empirical methods make it possible to see how audience members actually interrogated *Outdoors*’ dual perception, simultaneously *prising and apart and holding together* these conceptual layers: noticing ‘how things seem different yet the same’, navigating an awareness of closeness and difference.

To briefly explain the methodology: I was present during *Outdoors*’ month-long preparatory period. Working independently from either National Theatre Wales or Rimini Protokoll, but acting as both researcher and volunteer steward, in January 2010 I was given one of thirteen iPods and asked to walk around Aberystwyth, pointing the camera in front of me and chatting as I walked. My fellow volunteers and I were instructed to press record on our iPods at exactly the same time, then given a meeting place and told to arrive there precisely ten minutes later after circuitously traversing the streets. Later, in addition to narrating our passage, we were asked to complete a series of simple tasks, such as drawing on the pavement with chalk or

making a call from a payphone.

This formed the test-bed for *Outdoors*. In early 2010 we began working with some of the members from Heartsong, the Aberystwyth-based community choir. Each steward was given a choir member to 'buddy', and with our new companion we walked around town once more, this time asking performers to take us to points of interest and gathering their personal associations with these places. Rimini Protokoll then took the draft videos away and plotted out thirteen journeys in the production room, partially scripting the narratives by pointing the performers towards some of their most interesting revelations. Then over a weekend we did it for real.

The final format brought audiences to the same starting point as the performers – a local pub – and asked them to sit in exactly the same position as one of the choir members. Following their guide's video, participants then spread out across Aberystwyth, occasionally coming across other audiences on the street where choir members had previously crossed paths. By the end of *Outdoors* participants had walked with two separate guides, with their initial choir member directed to swap over with another at a designated time. This decision was partly pragmatic, as at this point the simultaneous recordings could stop and be resumed, with the two videos later edited together in the production room. Additionally, the journeys included a number of individual tasks – such as walking into the handsome Old College building on the seafront, or buying something from the Spar – as well as pre-agreed interim meeting points. For example, two of the choir members were a married couple, so a kiss was scripted between these partners. At the same time as their followers were watching the kiss onscreen, in actuality they were interacting with (or in many cases, standing uncomfortably next to) another participant on the here-and-now street.

As *Outdoors'* participants listened to choir members' narratives and retreaded their paths across town they occasionally caught glimpses of their guide onscreen, when they had briefly been reflected in shop windows and puddles. They also had the chance to see their second guide just before the crossover point, as the first approached and handed over the camera. Other than these brief moments, however, *Outdoors'* performers remained behind the camera until the very end of the event, when audiences were brought again into a single place. Led back from widespread journeys around Aberystwyth, all thirteen audiences were guided to a community hall in the centre of town. One by one they rejoined the rest of their group and could finally turn off their iPods – because here, in a room upstairs, the actual choir's weekly rehearsal was taking place.

Outdoors was performed on around forty occasions, with an upper limit of thirteen attendees at each production. Therefore, *Outdoors* attracted a maximum of 520 audience members (although as I was informed that a number of performances had not reached the full quota, the actual figure is likely to be considerably less). After each performance participants were given a hard-copy post-show questionnaire that they could either fill out on the spot and hand back, or take away and post in.

Alternatively, they could follow the website link provided and complete the online version at home.³ The questionnaire combined quantitative questions – such as asking people to rate the performance on a likert scale from ‘Excellent’ to ‘Very Poor’ – with qualitative questions that asked people to explain their response. In conducting this study I was less interested in attempting to ‘measure’ cultural value than in capturing discursive information about how people make sense of their own experience. The quali-quant design therefore went beyond asking audiences how successful they felt the performance had been, paying attention instead to the kinds of criteria people used to form judgments as well as to how those judgments were articulated (Sedgman 2016).

This project gathered 81 completed questionnaires for *Outdoors*, which means that at full capacity I would have captured responses from around a fifth of all audience members. According to Aberystwyth Arts Centre’s Box Office data, though, the average performance was at around 80% capacity, which means that it is likely each of my respondents represents approximately one in four of the total audience. In addition to the rating described at the beginning of this section, the questionnaire asked audiences to choose up to three orientations from a list of twelve that best described their motivations for attendance. This is visualised in **Figure 1** below:

³ A more detailed explication of the research methodology can be found in Sedgman 2016, along with a copy of the post-show questionnaire.

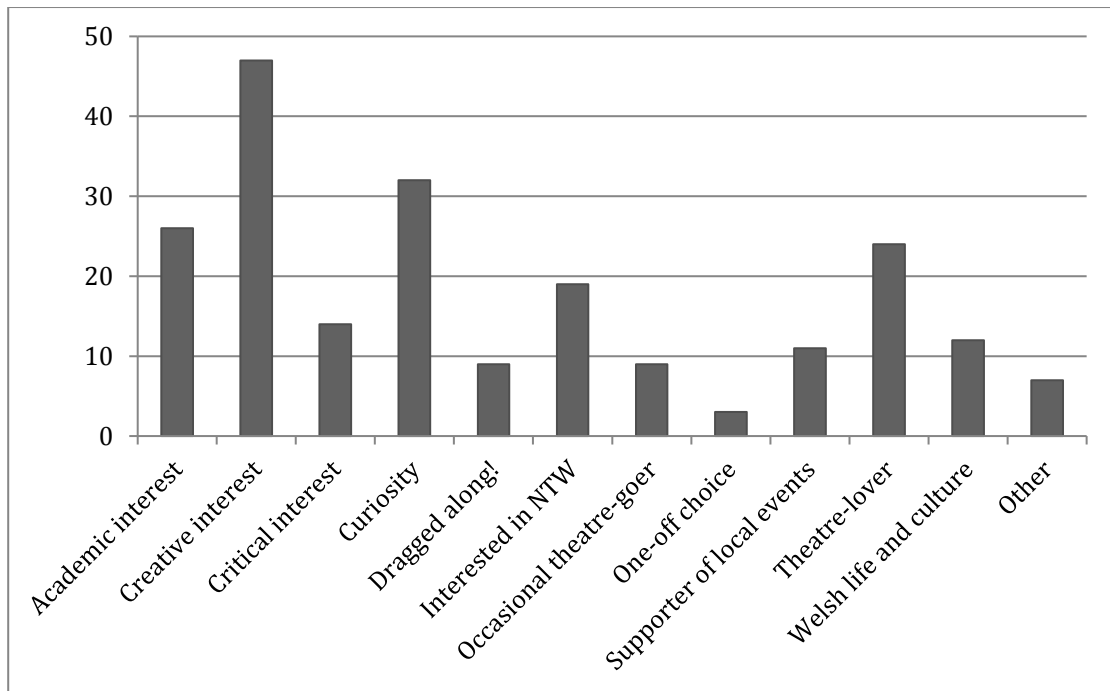


Figure 1: *Reasons for choosing to attend Outdoors.*

Viewed in isolation, these raw numbers are not terribly revealing: it is not clear from the figures alone what people think they mean when they choose 'Curiosity' or 'Creative Interest', or how people relate these categories to the production itself. This is where the quali-quantitative methodology becomes useful, as well as the comparative nature of the study. For example: as **Figure 2** demonstrates below, the most commonly chosen orientations varied markedly across productions, suggesting they attracted different kinds of participants for dissimilar reasons:

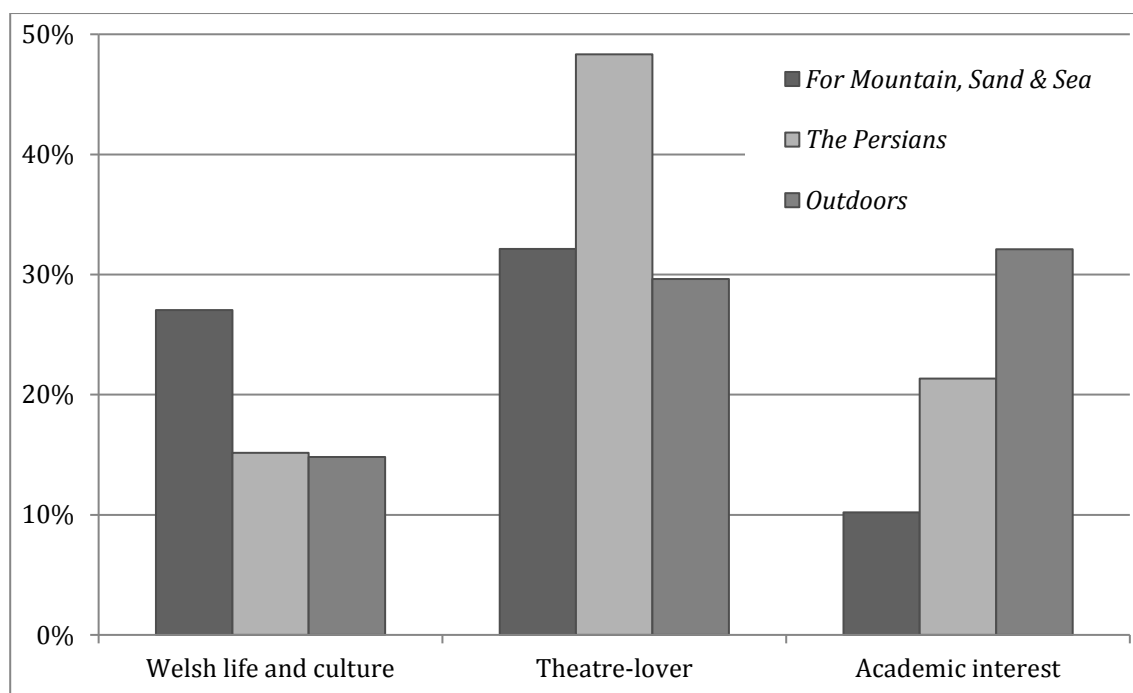


Figure 2: Most popular orientations for three case-study productions.

While the post-show questionnaire was made available to audiences for all thirteen launch-year events, the overwhelming majority of responses (488 out of 558, or 87%) were gathered from one of the three case-study productions in the graph above. These were *Outdoors* (81), *The Persians* (211), and *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* (196). While *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* engaged a higher proportion of people with an ongoing interest in 'Welsh Life & Culture', and *The Persians'* respondents distinctly oriented themselves as 'Theatre-Lovers', *Outdoors'* audiences were much more likely to attend due to 'Academic Interest'. In total, over a third of respondents for *Outdoors* cited academic interest as a primary reason for attending. Respondents for this production also tended to be younger than for other events, with 42% orienting themselves as 16-25 compared with a total average of 12%, and just 14% aged 60 or over compared with 34% overall.

What does this tell us? Well, Aberystwyth is a town with a particularly high density of academically associated residents. The 2001 census showed that the permanent population of Aberystwyth was around 16,000 permanent residents, of whom 2,000 people work for the university, plus an additional 8,500 students (Aberystwyth University 2016). Therefore, over a third of the town's total population is connected to Aberystwyth University as either students or staff. *Outdoors'* participants also positioned themselves as especially close by in terms of both travel time and location, as **Figure 3** demonstrates:

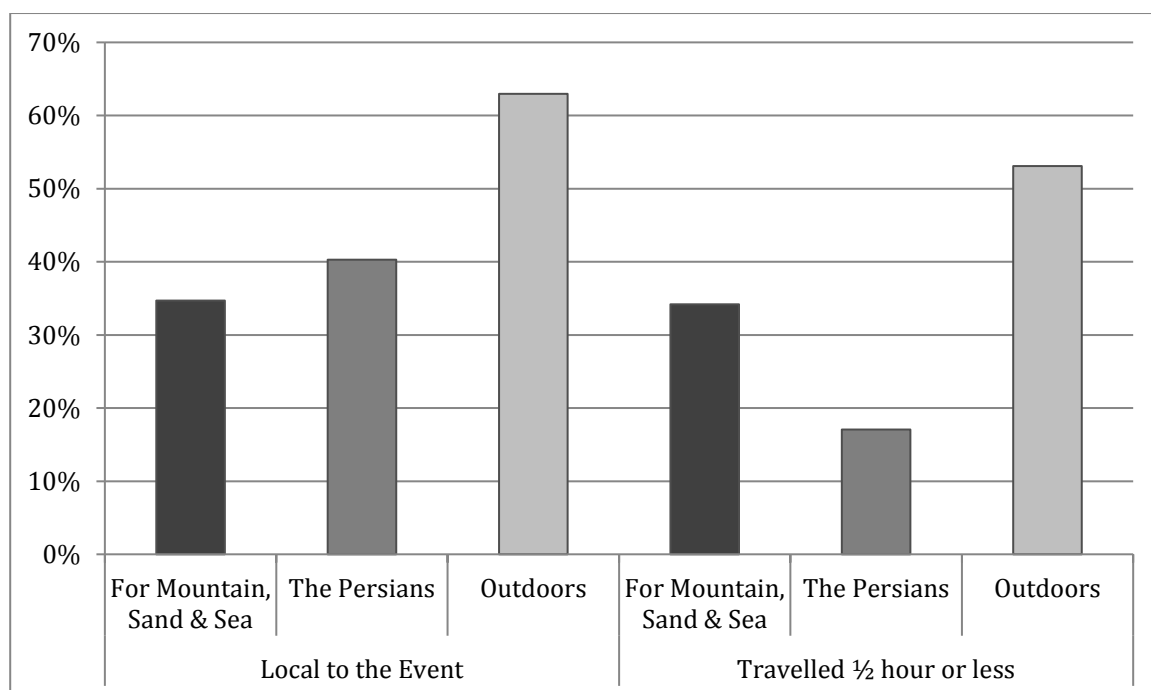


Figure 3: *Percentage of people who orientated themselves as living 'Local to the Event' and having travelled '½ Hour or Less' to reach the performance for each case-study production.*

Outdoors' audience was therefore primarily locally-based, and seemingly more likely than for other productions to have come with an existing interest in located, experimental, and intermedial performance. This is backed up by my analysis of qualitative explanations, which suggested that many participants were motivated to attend by their connections with the university:⁴

I'm a cultural geographer and it potentially seemed geographical. I love theatre and performance work. [499]

I'm researching new theatre work as part of developing my own practice. [502]

Always been interested to see Rimini Protokoll's work and something in NTW season. [503]

⁴ Numbers in brackets refer to unique respondent IDs. This allows the interested reader to track the trajectory of responses across a range of fields and publications.

They therefore tended to bring with them a prior understanding of what a performance of this nature might be able to achieve:

Some great concepts but underdeveloped. [437]

Brilliant opportunity largely wasted. Excellent idea – but content not engaging enough. [512]

Good in places, weak in others. The concept was good but the producers did not manage the process well. Better coordination, editing, linking, would have turned it into a great event! [559]

The experience felt disjointed and unfinished. A good idea, lots of potential but needed editing and tightening. [561]

It is worth paying attention to the tenor of these reactions. Whilst briefly expressed, these rather composed paragraphs suggest an awareness of what might constitute a ‘developed’ or ‘engaging’ theatrical experience. As I demonstrate elsewhere, this kind of response is

[m]ore than just an initial reaction to this production alone, [and] suggests a response that has been in some ways ‘rehearsed’, constructed through repeated exposure to theatrical discourses and practices. This is, to put it differently, a *well-formed view*. (Sedgman 2016, 120)

These audiences can therefore be seen to measure *Outdoors* against its envisaged possibilities. Phrases such as ‘wasted opportunity’ and ‘lots of potential but’ suggest that audiences tended to find value in the *concept* of *Outdoors* but critiqued its *execution*. An especially rich example of this came from one of the choir members themselves, who had contributed to the project as a performer. In their questionnaire they explained that ‘As a participant [I] was interested to see “finished” product’ [546]. They went on to indicate that they had raised issues with the show as they were making it. Like the respondents quoted above, they felt the experience they’d hoped for had not quite been realised, rating the event ‘Average’ overall:

A potentially excellent and innovative production was spoilt by a number of small but important factors, all of which were mentioned at the time of creating this production: e.g. weather factor, too many stand-still sections, routes not clearly enough ‘signposted’. [546]

In general, audiences for *Outdoors* tended to rate the event lower than average because they balanced the positive aspects of the experience against disappointments

with its implementation.⁵ So what kind of experience did these participants hope to be given? To explain this, it is necessary to dip into some of the debates around ‘immersion’.

‘You Get Lost in the Video’

In her seminal book *Immersive Theatres*, Josephine Machon considers the sensory engagements provided by immersive theatre. Whilst resisting taxonomising specific artworks as immersive or otherwise, she nonetheless offers a useful description of immersion as a practice that physically involves audiences within the action (2013, 58). Machon clarifies that co-presence is not a prerequisite for immersion, which for instance ‘can extend to sensual engagement via a clever use of intimate sound in headphones, despite the action being geographically separate to you’ (ibid, 67-68). It is clear from Machon’s account that immersion is generally conceived as a deepening process, characterized by a transition from outside to in:

The direct participation of the audience member in the work ensures she or he *inhabits* the immersive world created. This live(d), *praesent* experience, the participant’s physical body responding within an imaginative environment, is a pivotal element of an immersive experience. (ibid) [original emphasis]

As Adam Alston has shown, this form of inhabitation does not necessarily preclude frustration: companies like Shunt are creating immersive art that is in Claire Bishop’s terms ‘antagonistic’ (2004), uncovering rather than concealing structural inequalities. However, Alston explains how such frustrations are made possible through the ‘sensuous and absorbing’ quality of the work: an immersive environment which, echoing Machon, audiences ‘inhabit’ (2016, 170). Similarly, Gareth White’s 2013 book *Audience Participation in Theatre* asks what makes certain participatory experiences positive whilst others are excruciatingly embarrassing, and suggests that a successfully ‘seductive’ quality may in some way invite audiences *inside*.

⁵ It is important to recognise the difficulties inherent to any artistic production that relies on the input of volunteers, who frequently give their time for free or for minimal rewards. Indeed, in preparing Outdoors Rimini Protokoll needed to work to extremely tight deadlines, with many choir members organising the production process around work and other commitments. As a steward I previously had a taste of this responsibility, working with other individuals all under pressure to achieve a full take with no errors. There was therefore a palpable sense that in order to ensure manageability within the timeframe, the journeys had to be scaled back.

This can be tracked into Eirini Nedelkopoulou's useful term 'ecstasis', which she applies to specifically intermedial performances. Borrowing from Heidegger, Nedelkopoulou defines ecstasy as 'a mode of embodiment where participants "stand out" of themselves to become involved in a performance event where the physical performer has already escaped' (2011, 117).

Here Nedelkopoulou is referring to the practice of substituting physical performers for a kind of technological corporeality. As I explained at the beginning of this section, this is of course nothing new. Nor is it at all distinct to Rimini Protokoll: as Christopher Balme (2008) details, with examples ranging from the nineteenth-century Parisian theatrophone to the Wooster Group to Blast Theory, the company's productions must be considered in the general context of theatre's historical fascination with (and resistance to) new technological forms. This brings Rimini Protokoll into specific alignment with a long lineage of mediatised experiments: from Fluxus artists to sixties Happenings to 'a more recent challenge to cinematic modes of frontal, visual perception, [along with] notions of disembodiment' (ibid). Returning to the idea above, this image of disembodiment is important, as *Outdoors* was of course a primarily digital encounter. '[F]orsak[ing] the usual centre-stage position' (Nibbelink 2015, 12), choir members were not even *onscreen* but *behind* the screen, initially introduced as a hand holding the iPod, a voice punctuating the journey, an occasional reflection in glass or shadow on a wall. What Nedelkopoulou's use of ecstasy points us towards, therefore, is a sense of how this immersive engagement is supposed to operate when the performer themselves is physically absent. By taking performers' bodies out of the event, Nedelkopoulou suggests, a space is made inside the work which audiences – 'standing out' of themselves – are able to fill.

Indeed, there were indications from my study that the form of intimate disconnect produced by *Outdoors* produced a heightened sense of pleasure, by giving participants the opportunity to view the town through 'somebody else's eyes':

This gave a chance to see in through the eyes of someone who knows the history of the place. [490]

It was very different and interesting seeing a familiar place through somebody else's eyes. [515]

I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of seeing Aberystwyth through other people's eyes, ears, voices and most of all – hearts. What a wonderful concept this is! [523]

The phrase 'through someone else's eyes' is markedly somatic, positing the site of experience as firmly rooted in the body. Rather than encouraging participants to look *at* their guides, and thereby positioning its 'amateur' performers as a spectacle to be

observed, it is possible to see *Outdoors* as inviting audiences to look *through* them: to literally gaze at what they had been gazing at, all those weeks or months earlier. Respondents suggest that this act of embodied immersion was afforded by the use of digital technology, which in some respects situated audiences *as* the performers instead of simply co-present *with* them. For a number of people the highlight of this experience was its climax – ‘The joy is the end!’ [502] – which brought audiences suddenly and sharply into the present day, by leading them into the choir members’ shared space:

This was an amazingly moving (in many senses of the word) intricate performance. I felt the place open like a pop-up book, and space expanding; and once I heard the singers something surged in the virtual and the actual, which was an exceptional moment. [552]

My findings therefore present a distinct challenge to the deployment of ecstasis as Nedelkopoulou defines it – as a form of *forgetting*:

[W]hen audiences are immersed into a theatrical world, they do not really think about their bodies – for instance, about the eyes with which they are seeing the show – unless they are in pain (dys-appearance). The ecstatic body is a forgetful body that finds interest in something outside itself. (ibid, 120)

This lack of bodily awareness was certainly the case for one of *Outdoors*’ participants. The title of this section comes from a respondent who explained: ‘[t]he visual audio experience opened my senses to an unusual experience. You get lost in the video’ [527]. However, it was much more common for respondents to talk about how *Outdoors* stimulated a kind of simultaneous perception, rendering them able to concurrently remember and forget their real-life presence: to stand both ‘in’ and ‘out of’ themselves at once:

Following in the same footsteps as the choir members in the dark where they were in the light, noticing how things seem different yet the same. E.g. joggers along the seafront. [530]

So different, multi media experience, different realities co-existing. [520]

This opens up the idea of immersion beyond a single-track process of ‘going inside’ an artwork or ‘zoning out’ again when the performance fails to take you where you want to be (Machon 2013). Conversely, audiences are able to remain inside the world-world and inside the performance-world at once, building an immersive experience from often-competing layers. The immersive experience is therefore constructed *through* – and not *despite* – an awareness of the gaps between competing realities.

Bay-Cheng et al. describe this kind of spectatorial negotiation by using Hans Thies-Lehmann's concept of 'evenly hovering attention' (2010, 87), which I want to reposition here as an act of *managed ecstasis*:

Not only does the intermedial experience entail a perceptual awareness of the simultaneous presence of multiple sensual and cognitive impressions, it also makes the spectator aware of the experience of simultaneity itself. To experience intermediality therefore is an active embodied process of negotiating and shifting between different and conflicting medial realities, moving in and out of perceptual worlds, relating different impressions and signs, looking for a point of connection that might integrate the confusing and disturbing sensations in a meaningful whole, however unstable and ephemeral this whole may be. (ibid, 220)

As I have elsewhere argued, immersion 'can be usefully seen not as something *done* to audiences, nor even as something that performances *enable* audiences to experience, but rather as something that audiences *allow* a performance to do to them' (Sedgman 2016, 139). Partly immersed in the digital world and partly in the corporeal, *Outdoors*' participants were continuously – and often highly consciously – working to balance their attention between the technological realm and the actions of their own bodies:

I love walking and I really enjoyed being taken for a walk by the members of the choir. I've discovered some new things about Aberystwyth, I've had a doughnut from SPAR and sang a couple of songs (including Sheh Khan Vehahi), bumped into friends and had a great time. [548]

Different take, use of new(ish) technology, familiar yet unfamiliar. [534]

Rich, carrying, poetic, surprising, moving, fun, mesmerising, contemplative, uplifting, informative, transformative. Aber won't be the same. Loved it.

This balancing act was further revealed in a post-show discussion held during an academic conference called 'Relation & Participation', which took place in May 2011 at Aberystwyth. Attendees at the conference were offered a ticket to *Outdoors* followed by a live-streamed conversation with Rimini Protokoll. During this event, two audience members engaged in the following exchange:

There were three realities. There was a mismatch between these realities, the film and the reality all around us and the space in between, the 'argh! where's that bus going-'

'This car should be blue instead of red...'

The first discussant explained that the most interesting aspect of the experience had been this ‘confusion between the worlds’, to which he referred as an ‘overlap. Which reality am I in now and meant to be in now?’ The act of conscious navigation between these competing realities had been a source of pleasure. Responding to this point, Rimini Protokoll’s Daniel Wetzel talked how he cognitively managed his own awareness when road-testing the production:

Sometimes when walking I decided not to look at the image [onscreen]. I would rather walk particular parts of the tour and not look, be distracted. But that’s not really designed- It’s more the way we deal with that, to see something like this, I mean there’s a certain- At some point when you start analysing reality and cutting it to thin slices, I think you miss the whole point of the fact that it’s really complex by itself.

As Parker-Starbuck explains, ‘a physical model like theatre might reinvest in the role of the spectator, not by asking us to suspend disbelief and “plug in,” but to participate more actively’ (2011a, 61). Within *Outdoors* I found that this active participation frequently manifested in a mutable sense of *decision*: of choosing at times to ‘thinly slice’ (in Wetzel’s terms) the performance by focusing closely on one specific aspect; at others, to evenly hover their attention between the world onscreen and their bodies in reality. This dual perception was therefore not a product of incapacity – of audiences being lulled into a forgetful kind of participation, as the term ‘ecstasis’ suggests – but was achieved through palpable levels of understanding, awareness, and inclination.

So what went wrong? Despite overall positivity, two-thirds of all participants expressed some dissatisfaction with the experience. Many talked specifically about leaving *Outdoors* longing for deeper connections:

I loved the concept, discovering a town through the stories of its residents and the huge ending is touching and celebratory. However, I felt the wider work could have been thicker, more multifarious with the real world, more profound stories to up the intimacy. [503]

It was an experience that worked really well as theatre. I didn’t really feel that I got to know any of the people telling their stories well – didn’t get below the surface. [558]

Very interesting piece. Liked the live element at the end. It felt a little ‘in progress’ as a piece. I think it would have benefited from more research time, more connectivity with the town/people. [504]

In the respondent quotations above, audiences talk about wishing for ‘thicker, more multifarious’ associations, a deeper level of insight into choir members’ narratives,

and a greater sense of ‘connectivity’ between the performance and the town. And yet it was important that this thick, multifarious, connective experience should also be *disturbing*:

Great idea that didn’t quite come off. Clever in dealing with temporality but needed a full turn-out, as people weren’t where they should have been. **Best when in pub/restaurant – quite unsettling.** And enjoyed ending. Needed to take in more of the town – a bit limited in scope. [500]

Good but excellent in parts. **Some of the commentary was a bit too cosy (meetings etc).** The joy is the end! [502]

In the two responses above it is possible to contrast the word ‘unsettling’ with the word ‘cosy’. Interestingly, the usual connotations are here reversed: ‘cosy’ is used as a negative marker, while ‘unsettling’ becomes positive. This resonates with Bay-Cheng et al.’s description of intermediality as able to produce moments of ‘perceptive dislocation’ (2010, 219). What stood in the way was the production’s ‘cosiness’, which in this context suggests dissatisfaction with the production’s overly-calculated construction:

It was interesting and I found out new perspectives on Aber. Would have liked to see more of the town. Liked the layering of place and memory but sometimes just felt that it was overly (and knowingly) constructed. [499]

Began to feel a bit controlled by end - hence not excellent rating. [509]

The problem wasn’t necessarily that the show had been the product of careful construction by Rimini Protokoll; in fact, around a quarter of my respondents suggested that better structuring and editing would have improved the experience. Rather, in the above responses lurks the possibility that within *Outdoors* the experience had been just too *neat* or *controlled*, the invisible guiding hand of the practitioners too easy to perceive.

Here it is worth considering Sarah Bay-Cheng et al.’s observation that ‘it is remarkable how in many contemporary intermedial performances the theme of the retrieving of, and negotiating with, the past emerges’ (2010, 220). *Outdoors* was similarly preoccupied with the past. Through the accompanying audio narrative, relayed via headsets, audiences were given access to guides’ oral histories: their memories and knowledge of an Aberystwyth disappeared. Simultaneously, the video onscreen relayed another former version of Aberystwyth: the town as it looked and sounded on the day the filming took place. This rendered Aberystwyth a *place twice lost*, with the town’s corporeal present experienced in chorus with its doubly-layered past. Here, there were signs that audiences wanted to navigate between these layers

in order to forge connections with the people and places they encountered, and in doing so to construct a deeply immersive experience. For participants such as those quoted below, *Outdoors*' primary problem was that the town – with its rich history, its hidden places, its quirky residents and overlooked stories – had not yet fully been *found*:

I think that the performances were of one view of Aber as I live and work in the area nothing was of a surprise to me. This made it mundane and one-sided. [547]

Thought [...] interaction with live events on screen to live events in real life were really interesting. Found events were almost too literal and no room for imagery. [532]

I felt that it did not fully exploit the medium – real people's voices in location, special stories. I'd like to have heard more about Aber's history and walked over a larger area. Some parts (the secret stair and the brother's story, drawing faces on the wall) were very good – others did not seem as location-specific. [511]

Conclusion

Eirini Nedelkopoulou describes how Janet Cardiff's 'Walks' series produced a 'mixed-media milieu' that brought audiences to 'the point where the physical confronts the mediat(iz)ed, bridging the gap between the there and then of mediat(izat)ion and the here and now of live performance' (2011, 120). In *Outdoors*, audiences were asked to negotiate between three levels of attention: the 'here and then' evoked by performers' narratives, the 'here and then' of the day they were recorded, and the 'here and now' of the present. By analysing a range of responses, this article has explored how different participants talked about the process of managing this balancing act. At its best, *Outdoors* worked to render the familiar unfamiliar, 'unsettle' audiences' relationship with the town, put 'difference' and 'sameness' on display, and merge the 'virtual' with the 'actual'. But its overly-calculated construction and weak connections to place made it difficult for audiences to make those deeper associations. Nonetheless, when markers of immersion *were* articulated, they suggested an ability to manage multiple forms of awareness simultaneously within the immersive experience: to both remember and forget at once.

In a previous issue of *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, David Overend argued that the move towards mobile experiences has been driven by a desire 'to reach out and connect' with people and places, offering audiences an antidote to the effects of globalization and an increasingly precarious social realm (2013, 370). Overend proposed the need for further research into how these connections are

formed: both between audiences and performers, and between audiences and place. Bringing together a range of participant responses this article has begun to attempt this work, by explicating how 'the physical, embodied experience of going somewhere and doing something' (ibid, 371) is actually understood.

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